

SLAM DUNK! Alonzo in his glory on the court.

Plenty of professional athletes have turned to asana, pranayama, and even meditation to cope with the stress of sports and get an edge over their competitors, from NBA star Kevin Garnett to football running back Ricky Williams to golfer David Duval. But Mourning needed yoga for a more serious reason. In 2000, he was diagnosed with a life-threatening kidney disease. With the help of doctors, yoga teachers, family, and friends, he turned a potential tragedy into a rebirth of sorts, and against all odds, returned to the court an even stronger warrior.

“As you get older, you’ve got to do more to help your body deal with the rigors of life,” he says. “I swear by yoga. I wish I’d started practicing when I was 22, when I first got in the league.”

THE HISTORY OF ZO

Alonzo (aka “Zo”) began to transform into one of NBA’s best after his third season in 1995, when he was traded from the Charlotte Hornets to the Miami Heat. In the next five seasons, he was voted Defensive Player of the Year twice, and helped the U.S. men’s basketball team win the Gold Medal at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia. But his life was about to change.

After flying thousands of miles, playing ball like a maniac, and adjusting to different time zones almost weekly, Mourning was suddenly, irreversibly exhausted. By the time he returned to Miami for the summer, the basketball warrior knew something was wrong: he was too tired to play with his kids.

With another NBA season approaching, Mourning went to see his doctor. A blood test radically changed the direction of his life: Mourning was diagnosed with anemia—an often overlooked symptom of chronic kidney disease. A kidney biopsy revealed he had focal segmental glomerulosclerosis (FSGS), a life-threatening illness that causes scarring or hardening of the blood vessels in the kidney and hinders the organ’s ability to clean the blood.

The causes of FSGS are largely unknown, but without treatment its deterioration

of kidney function can require dialysis and ultimately a transplant to keep a patient alive. For some people, though, dietary changes and prescription medication can drastically slow the disease’s progression and even prevent a transplant. The good news for Zo was that doctors detected his illness early, and they were hopeful that medication and lifestyle changes would boost his chances for recovery. But for a basketball warrior who had dedicated his life to becoming one of the best players in the world, the diagnosis was a shocking blow. In his prime, just short of his ultimate goal of winning a championship, Zo’s doctors ordered him to stop playing basketball immediately.

RX: YOGA?

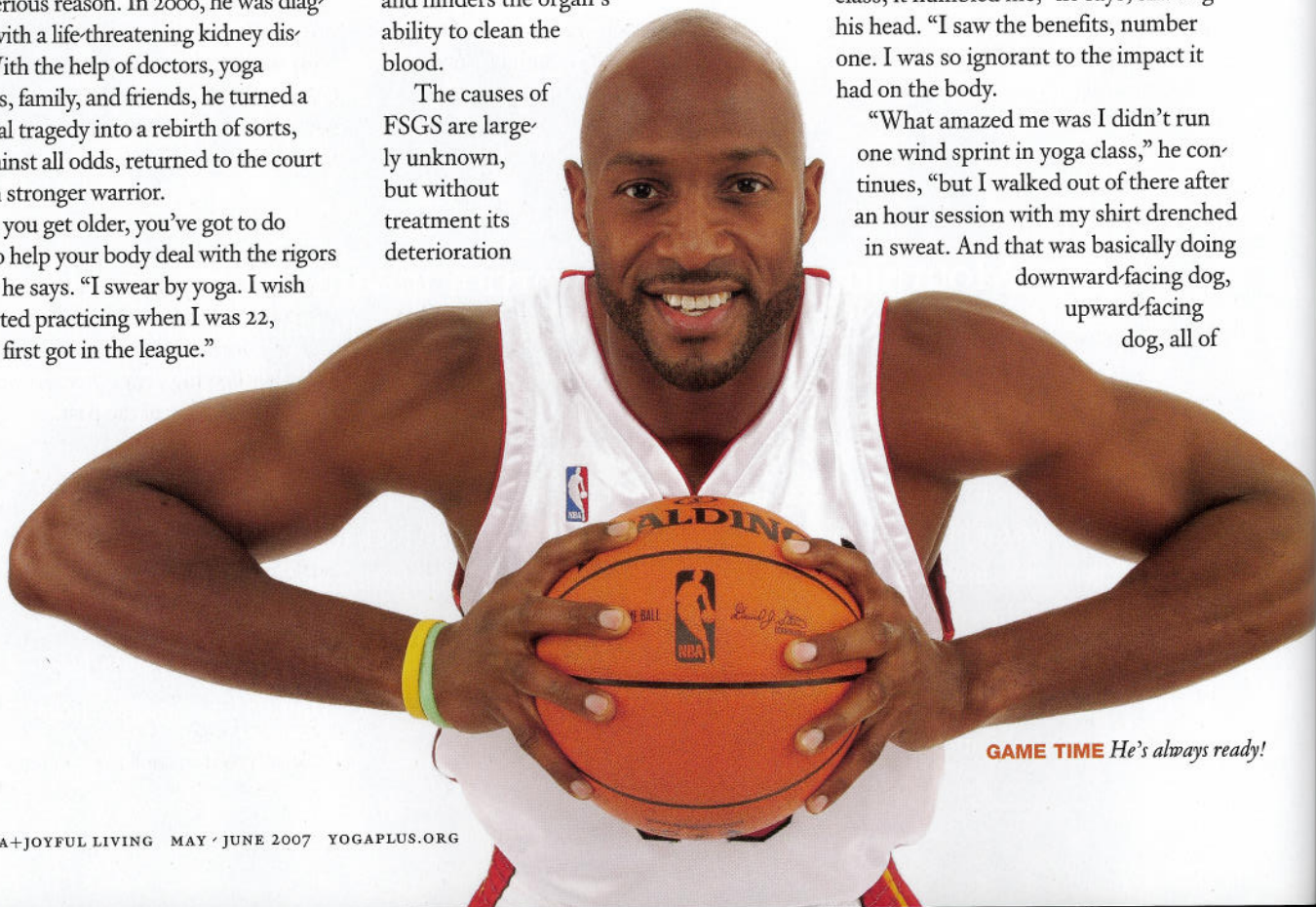
Optimistic he would eventually return to the NBA, one of Mourning’s doctors suggested he try hatha yoga to stay in shape.

Yoga? He winced. *For a professional basketball player?* “I thought it was more geared toward women,” admits Mourning, who wanted to cling to his basketball drills and strength conditioning.

“But when I did my first one-on-one class, it humbled me,” he says, shaking his head. “I saw the benefits, number one. I was so ignorant to the impact it had on the body.

“What amazed me was I didn’t run one wind sprint in yoga class,” he continues, “but I walked out of there after an hour session with my shirt drenched in sweat. And that was basically doing

downward-facing dog,
upward-facing
dog, all of



GAME TIME He’s always ready!